

EDWARDS: Bad questions hinder productive debates, conversations

By Walker Edwards on April 23rd, 2014

“Millennials Don’t Stand a Chance” was the title and winning motion of the April 16 episode of Intelligence Squared, a NPR debate podcast. After an hour of debate, the side arguing against millennials, people born from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, won citing the generations tendencies for optimism and narcissism as being the twin roots of their downfall.

Now, I won’t recap the debate or argue against the outcome. If you want a discussion on what it’s like to be a millennial or the problems we face, you can check out my colleague Devin Grier’s work. While the outcome of the debate was upsetting, what’s more upsetting is that the debate happened in the first place.

I’m not against debate. I write opinion columns for my college newspaper, and I love debate in all its forms, casual or formal. Good debate is the cornerstone of democracy and of good discourse. But good debates can’t thrive without good questions, and “Do millennials stand a chance?” isn’t a good question. We’re instead bombarded with bad questions, such as “Can anyone stop Hillary Clinton?” or “Are selfies corrupting the youth?”

To have a meaningful conversation about anything, you need to have good questions. We’ve all been stuck in endless, mindless small talk, with boring questions we’ve been asked a thousand times. “What’s your major? Where are you going after graduation? Are you nervous about your future?”

We’ve heard these questions a thousand times and often have stock answers to them. We can rattle off basic facts about ourselves without thinking. And that’s the problem.

Bad questions don’t make us think. They simply lead us to repeat what’s been said before. People have asked “Are selfies corrupting the youth?” 100 different ways before phone cameras were even invented.

People wondered if flappers would ever give up the party life. People wondered if hippies would cut their hair and get jobs. Right now, people are wondering if millennials will burst free from stereotypes and make something of themselves. But this wondering is flawed.

Asking a question such as “Do millennials stand a chance?” assumes that the answer could be no. It assumes that an entire group of people united by an arbitrary demographic marking can’t cut it in the real world.

A question such as this that wonders if a group, be it based on age, class, gender, etc. is ready for the real world is just basic discrimination. It’s the assumption that just because you’re outside of the norm or not the group currently in control that you lack value – that some groups with some arbitrary features are better than other groups with even more arbitrary features.

But bad questions aren’t just overdone and discriminatory. Bad questions lack an unbiased and reliable answerer.

“Can anyone stop Hillary Clinton?” has no unbiased person to answer. Clinton and her supports can’t answer because they’re biased in her favor. People opposing her can’t answer either. People who are in the middle may not care if she can be stopped – or even what she’s supposed to be stopped from doing.

Bad questions are more than just upsetting and ill-advised. They slow down conversation from getting to interesting and important places. Instead of asking whether a generation can make it, we could ask questions like “What would another Clinton win mean?” or “What do selfies say about beauty culture?” or “What does it mean to have a chance?”

We’ll always be asking questions, whether they’re pretentious questions to prove we’re awake in class or important questions that we ask our loved ones. We need to ask good questions to create good conversation – and so we can stop wasting people’s times.